

A photograph of two people in business attire shaking hands in an office. The person on the left is wearing a light blue striped shirt and dark trousers. The person on the right is wearing a blue button-down shirt and a dark tie. They are standing in front of a large window with a brick wall visible outside. The image is partially obscured by a dark grey semi-transparent overlay containing text.

# How to Build a Respectful Workplace

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Published on [www.lorman.com](http://www.lorman.com) - March 2019

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## **How to Build a Respectful Workplace**

**By D. Albert Brannen**

There is honor and dignity in work. Successful employers understand this axiom and build workplaces where their employees are respected. As a result, they experience lower employee turnover, less employment-related litigation and fewer problems caused by meddling unions. Their employees are also happier and more productive. This article outlines 10 tips for building a respectful workplace and reaping these benefits.

### **1. Practice the Golden Rule**

The Golden Rule says to treat others as you expect to be treated. Employers should treat their employees with the same level of respect and appreciation as they want from employees. On the other hand, employers who disrespect their employees will not get the most out of them. Their employees will be less productive, less loyal and be more likely to turn to an outside union to represent them against the employer.

### **2. Walk the Talk, Don't just Talk the Talk**

It is not enough for employers to have the proper policies or to say the right things to employees. Employees are smart enough to understand when employer actions are not consistent or in conflict with their written or spoken words. In fact, courts even recognize that when a manager's "actions" undermine the employer's policies on harassment, discrimination or retaliation, the actions control and the employer loses certain affirmative defenses that might have otherwise been available for the organization to avoid or at least reduce its liability.

### **3. Lead By Example**

Another way to say "walk the talk" is to lead by example. In history, the greatest generals led their troops from the front. They never expected of their troops anything more than they were willing to do in battle. In the workplace, managers should lead by example and never expect anything of their employees that they are not committed to doing themselves. When leading by example, managers build their own credibility with employees and gain their respect.

### **4. Spend Time With Employees Every Day and Be Accessible**

To fully understand employee perspectives and be aware of changing employee sentiments, managers need to spend time with employees and to be accessible every day. Accessibility gives employees confidence that their manager will be available to help resolve any job-related issues if or when they arise. It may also help the manager spot early warning signs of union activity or employee claims of mistreatment, favoritism, discrimination, harassment or retaliation.

### **5. Be Empathetic**

Employees have unique concerns, goals and interests. Often times, those concerns, goals and interests are not the same as their managers. In fact, they can be quite different. Professor Kenneth Kovach of George Mason University has spent decades trying to help supervisors understand the differences between rank and file employees in an effort to help supervisors better manage their direct reports. A key element in appreciating "where employees are coming from" is for managers to have empathy for their employees.

## **6. Establish Formal Communication Channels**

At a minimum, employers need to have the right formal communication channels in place. Formal channels may include, among others, group meetings and written communications such as informative websites, Intranets, newsletters or letters to employees' homes about important news employees and their families should know. More sophisticated formal channels may include skip-channel meetings, hotlines or 360 degree reviews. Having these types of channels in place objectively signals to employees that their employer respects its workers enough to keep them informed and to listen to them.

## **7. Keep Commitments**

Making promises or commitments to employees and then failing to follow through on them is a sign of disrespect. Managers do not have to solve every employee grievance or concern—but if a response or specific action is promised, the manager must deliver.

## **8. Tell Employees What You Want**

Employees respect bosses who honestly tell staff what is expected of them. When managers sugarcoat or dance around problems, or fail to take decisive action, they lose the respect of their employees. Likewise, when companies keep employees “in the dark,” it breeds disrespect and distrust of the employer.

## **9. Don't Surprise Employees**

Employees hate surprises like sudden changes in assignments, schedules, mandatory overtime or terminations. When employers spring changes on employees without adequate notice, it signals a blatant disregard and disrespect for the fact that employees have lives and obligations outside of the workplace.

## **10. Expect The Best From Employees**

Employers that expect the best from their employees and believe in their ability to succeed, generally invest more resources in them. This type of supportive, positive work environment tends to manifest the employer's genuine respect for its employees. Likewise, staff members tend to reciprocate with more respect for their employers.

## **Conclusion**

Employers must work hard to create and sustain a respectful work environment. Respect does not come easy and it can be lost in a second. But when employees believe their employer respects them, they are more likely to succeed at their jobs and ultimately they create fewer practical and legal problems for their employer.

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